TACKLING MENTAL HEALTH THROUGH THE ARTS AND CULTURE

Sermon at the Civic Service

Readings: 1 Samuel 16.14-23; Philippians 4.4-13; Saint Augustine, *The City of God* IV.4

THE Mayor has chosen as the theme of his mayoral year 'tackling mental health through the arts and culture', and this service is an opportunity to think about that. We shall no doubt conclude by saying that we have, as a society, a long way to go; but let's begin by remembering how far, as a society, we have come.

I do not suppose that many of the Mayor's remoter predecessors, over the past four hundred and one years of the Mayoralty of this City, would have thought that the promotion of art and culture was the business of the city council, unless it was to make the Guildhall as magnificent as possible (in which of course they succeeded). And I do not suppose that they would have thought tackling mental health was the business of the city council, unless it was to build the kind of institution to which we now hardly want to give a name. The excellent work done today by ONSIDE, which we are encouraged to support through the collection this afternoon, would not have been considered a matter of public policy. And very few of those early mayors, I am quite sure, would have thought that there was any connection at all between the promotion of art and culture, and the addressing of mental health. The fact that our Mayor's choice of this theme, while admirable, and one I warmly welcome, is not wholly contentious, shows that in this respect society has made some progress.

Part of what we have learnt, of course, is that mental health or mental illness is not something simply inside a person's head; it is connected to a range of external factors, of which the physical environment plays an important part; that there is a close connection between mental health and social wellbeing; between how we feel and the community in which we live. In this respect, we owe much to visionary social reformers in the past, such as Octavia Hill (now commemorated in the Church of England's calendar) who helped to found the National Trust primarily to save open spaces in cities and woodland areas from being built on – for the benefit of those whose lives were otherwise confined to the slums.

Mental health is influenced by the physical environment; art and culture are part of that physical environment; art and culture give us the sights and the sounds and the ideas and the impressions that nourish our sense of happiness and wellbeing; and that brings the connection between mental health, and art and culture, into the realm of public policy and the business of government.

We have come a long way in understanding this; but we have, as I have already suggested, a long way to go. So what are the obstacles that stand in our way? I mention two.

First, money. All organisations that promote art and culture will point to a lack of money. I speak from the experience of this cathedral with our own arts programme, including the Three Choirs Festival, including Shakespeare in the Cathedral (which I hope may be revived). I know that Severn Arts, whom we are encouraged to support through the collection this afternoon, will say the same. I point no finger; I simply notice an ingrained national habit. Culture and the arts contribute billions to the national economy; but are still seen by many as hobbies for the few.

Which brings me to the other obstacle to the promotion of art and culture as contributory factors to social wellbeing and mental health; which is, I venture to suggest, élitism. By élitism, I mean the perception, not the reality, that the great tradition of architecture, painting, sculpture, literature, theatre, and music, belongs exclusively to a narrow class of people and is not for everyone. I have encountered this in my own enthusiasm for Shakespeare. Now I could point you to the success of the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust in Stratford in engaging primary school children in Shakespeare; I could tell you of a charity that takes Shakespeare into prisons and which helps prisoners learn to act, and sometimes even to read, by playing Shakespeare; but there are still those who say that prisoners and children should be given something less challenging. That is not good educational policy; it is élitism; it is inverted snobbery. To take another example, Mr Mayor, you recently promoted the Elgar Festival in this city under the slogan of 'Elgar for Everyone'; I applaud it; but you know, as I do, that that is an aspiration and not yet an achievement; and the charge of élitism, in the case of Elgar, as in the case of Shakespeare, stands in our way.

May I say in passing that I think this is a peculiarly British disease: I do not find, for instance, that the Italians are embarrassed by their national poet, Dante; the film star Roberto Benigni can fill not a theatre but a stadium for his public recitations of Dante (who lived, you remember, three centuries before Shakespeare).

Now I know I am hovering on the brink of a minefield (not for the first time in my sermons at this Civic Service). I accept that there is the huge issue of inclusivity: of how the many communities represented in our plural society can appropriate the cultural traditions of the past. This is something of which I have some small experience as a student of Shakespeare; but I have very much more experience as a priest of the Church of England. The reception, the appropriation, the interpretation, the celebration of our four-thousand-year-old religious tradition are what all the mainstream churches are engaged in daily. It's our business. Making the past live in the present; making the culture of past communities of people alive for very different communities of people today; finding the pathways into that tradition for people of all genders, all ethnic backgrounds, all variations of ability: that is what we are constantly trying to do. We may not always do it very well, but we know that that's the task. It means, for instance, in the context of this service, noticing a very ancient story embedded in the Old Testament, about music being used to soothe the shattered nerves of King Saul, and remembering that music has this role in mental health today. It means noticing that in his Epistle to the Philippians, the apostle Paul suddenly breaks into the language of the pagan classical philosophers to praise what is excellent and beautiful and true. And it means recalling that much of the groundwork of social philosophy and social justice was laid by Christian thinkers such as Saint Augustine centuries ago; but whose words still speak to us today.

Like religious faith, art and culture are not locked in the past. It is vital to society, and to our collective wellbeing, that there is a constant explosion of the contemporary in every area of the arts. But it is equally vital to society, and to our collective wellbeing, that what is contemporary today is in vigorous dialogue with that which was contemporary in earlier times: that Shakespeare, who was a ground-breaker in the theatre of his day, continues to break ground today; that Elgar, who was a musical innovator in his day, continues to inspire innovation in music today. And may I add, since we are here in this cathedral, that it is also vital that the Christian faith embodied in this building, also continues to play a constructive and creative part in our society, in our city and county, for our collective wellbeing.

PETER ATKINSON
Dean of Worcester

Preached at the Civic Service in Worcester Cathedral
on Sunday 19 June 2022.